



The Commonwealth of Massachusetts

Department of Education

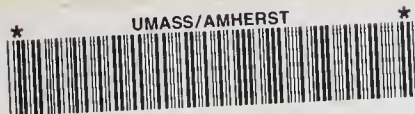
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GUIDELINES FOR THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS CONCERNING RELIGIOUS HOLIDAYS

Religious belief and disbelief are matters of personal consideration rather than governmental authority. The First Amendment to The Constitution of the United States established this principle in these words: "...Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof..."

The meaning of these words has been interpreted in different ways. Jefferson's phrase "wall of separation between Church and State" is probably the most familiar expression of the idea they contain.

A more specific definition was contained in a United States Supreme Court decision (Everson vs. Board of Education) in 1946:

"The 'establishment of religion' clause of the First Amendment means at least this: Neither a state nor the Federal Government can set up a church. Neither can pass laws which aid one religion, aid all religions, or prefer one religion over another. Neither can force nor influence a person to go or remain away from church against his will or force him to profess a belief or disbelief in any religion. No person can be punished for entertaining or professing religious beliefs or disbeliefs, for church attendance or non-attendance..."

The emphasis here is on the neutrality that government must observe in matters of religion. Neutral means neither opposing nor promoting religion.

It would be a mistake also to interpret complete neutrality about religion to mean complete silence. The importance of religion in history, culture, and the arts cannot be ignored, and should have a place in education. The distinction must be made, however, between such studies as part of the curriculum, and the celebration of religious holidays in a manner which is devotional, or doctrinal, or both. The distinction rests on whether the purpose or effect of such practices is the advancement of religion.

Schools may benefit from programs which increase students' understanding of the variety of beliefs that are held in a pluralistic society. Important basic values such as

love, compassion, family ties, peace, and good will toward men run like common threads through different beliefs. The schools should focus on these values, rather than merely on the different forms in which they are expressed.

This view of the relationship of religion to public schools leads to the following guidelines which should be used by school districts in developing or reviewing their own policy statements and regulations. While the Board of Education recognizes that local School Committees are in the best position to develop these for their own districts, local policy should be consistent with the following guidelines:

- I. The public schools must be neutral in matters of religion. The schools must show no preference for one religion over another, and must refrain from the promotion of any religion or all religions. Consequently, no religious celebrations may be held in the public schools.

“Religious celebration” is defined as:
 - A. A formal observance, including worship or religious services of any kind whether or not conducted by a clergyman. Religious observances cannot be justified by the fact that the majority of students or individuals in a given community happen to approve the practice or by the fact that individual students may absent themselves upon parental request.
 - B. The display of religious objects or symbols, except those that are integral parts of a short-term study in the curriculum, e.g., art, history, etc.
 - C. The presentation of religious music, except to the extent that such music is presented for its musical rather than its religious content. No songs or music programs that have a significance for a particular religion should be sung or performed in the school during the period which coincides with the community celebration of the events portrayed in the music. This guideline clearly permits the singing of festive songs which cannot be associated with a religious celebration.
- II. A program or observance related to a religious holiday in theme or timing should be evaluated as to its purpose and effect. If either the purpose or the effect is judged to be religious rather than secular, the activity would violate the First Amendment, and would therefore not be acceptable. If both the purpose and the effect are judged to be secular rather than religious, the program would not violate the First Amendment, and would therefore be acceptable.
- III. The school should avoid any activity, display or exhibit which seems to promote or give its approval to religious matters.
- IV. In planning school-year calendars, local School Committees should recognize the possible effects of religious holidays on attendance. The right of parents to

determine when their children shall be absent from school because of religious observance should not be limited by school authorities, nor should students be penalized or deprived of make-up opportunities for such absences, or pressured to choose between school attendance and religious observance.

It is the responsibility of the public schools to teach mutual understanding, brotherhood, and respect for all individuals and all beliefs. In pursuing this goal, teaching in the public schools can and should take cognizance of the fact that holidays are observed differently by different religious groups. Teachers should likewise respect the fact that some individuals' beliefs do not include religious observances.

Teaching about religious holidays or religion in general should be objective, should avoid any doctrinal impact, and should avoid any implication that religious doctrines have the support of school authority.

